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RUACAAA/COMUSKOREA INTEL SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001707

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: "DR. CORN" SAYS DPRK HARVEST COULD BE OFF 60
PERCENT

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Biologist Kim Soon-kwon, an internationally-recognized corn expert, told us on October 23 that the DPRK corn and rice harvests could be a staggering 60 percent lower than last year, based on recent field observations near Kaesong and Pyongyang. Kim explained that this year's crops were stunted by a one-two punch of insufficient good-quality fertilizer and nasty weather. As they descend on fields to help bring in the harvest, hundreds of thousands of city residents, students, and soldiers will quickly realize that winter and spring may again bring famine, Kim asserted. Based on his experience in the North, Kim indicated that tensions would likely be high during harvest, with theft and altercations over food posing significant social stability challenges for the DPRK's security apparatus. End summary.

Catastrophic Damage to Corn and Rice Crops

¶2. (C) Dr. Kim Soon-kwon, a noted biologist who recently made his 52nd trip to the DPRK to help improve the country's corn crop yield, told poloff on October 23 that he expects a lack of high-quality fertilizer this year will reduce the regime's corn harvest to approximately 40 percent of a normal year. Kim examined corn fields in the vicinity of Pyongyang in September and observed very poor ear development and soil conditions. Ears of corn in the fields he observed appeared to be a fraction of the size they ought to be so close to harvest time. He indicated that rice fields he saw had plants that were similarly stunted; by this time of year, he explained, stalks should be bent over with the weight of a full head of rice. In contrast, the stalks he observed in October in the Kaesong area were standing straight up. Kim said the private vegetable plots that non-elite North Koreans rely on to fend off starvation were likely also in bad shape.

¶3. (C) Kim said that in the fields he visited, the soil appeared not to have been fertilized adequately, no surprise given that the ROK has not provided fertilizer assistance to the North since 2007. In 2008, North Korean farmers were able to use surplus fertilizer from 2007 aid shipments, but Kim claimed there was none in storage this year. Efforts to rely on organic fertilizer were hampered by the lack of livestock. Asked to explain what happened to the crop, Kim's North Korean hosts said that during the critical flowering time in July they had received very little rain, followed by

excessive rain in August. The DPRK interlocutors further claimed that the spring had been abnormally cold and dry in northern provinces, which Kim believed to be consistent with the weather pattern observed in Northeast China this spring.

¶4. (C) Kim's contacts explained that the lack of fertilizer and weather-induced stress had led male flowers to bloom on average 7-10 days before the female flowers, significantly impeding pollination. Kim had previously instructed his counterparts to collect pollen in such conditions and facilitate the pollination process by hand, claiming that doing so could boost crop yields by up to 100,000 tons, but the North Koreans failed to take his advice. Kim observed that although the North's farming techniques had improved greatly over the past 10 years, their understanding of modern agricultural science was still rudimentary. The DPRK's premier expert on corn had about the same level of sophistication as a typical South Korean graduate student, Kim lamented.

Disappointing Harvest Could Sow Seeds of Unrest -----

¶5. (C) Kim noted that in lean years October is a sensitive time as the hundreds of thousands of city dwellers, students, and soldiers mobilized to assist with the harvest quickly realize how bad things are. He observed that every collective field in the DPRK has an armed guard to prevent stealing, but in a lean year like this, it would be common for workers in the fields to steal grain by putting it in their pockets and socks. Typically, the regime would provide

workers with extra food rations during the harvest to discourage theft; that is not the case this year, he indicated.

¶6. (C) Echoing concerns we have heard from other contacts (reftel), Kim noted that since the famine of the late 1990s, peasants have resolved not to suffer the way they did then. The "most difficult time" would be March and early April 2010, before the first potato crop came in, he predicted.

On Second Thought, We'll Take the Seeds -----

¶7. (C) Kim noted that in contrast to his two previous visits to the DPRK this year, security and agricultural officials he met this time displayed what he characterized as an "attitude of weakness." He explained that during his September trip to Pyongyang, DPRK counterparts had declined his offer to provide them with seed corn. By early October, possibly due to a better understanding of how poor the harvest would be, officials he met with in Kaesong were eager to discuss the possibility of getting seed corn from Kim's NGO.

Biographic Note -----

¶8. (SBU) Dr. Kim, affectionately known to the ROK public as "Dr. Corn," is Director General of the International Agricultural Research Institute of Kyungpook National University. He is also president of the International Corn Foundation, an NGO engaged in aid projects throughout the developing world. In 1998 he began aid work in the DPRK, establishing four experimental stations there, helping farmers to improve cultivation techniques and assisting them in developing seed corn strains appropriate for local conditions.
STEPHENS